

**Testimony of Jason Snead
Executive Director, Honest Elections Project
Senate Bill 215
Ohio Senate General Government Committee
February 21, 2024**

Thank you for the opportunity to return to my home state and testify today on Senate Bill 215, to prohibit both direct and indirect foreign contributions to ballot measure campaigns. My name is Jason Snead, executive director of the Honest Elections Project, a nonprofit group founded on the principle that every American has the right to vote in free, fair, and secure elections.

Americans do not want foreign nationals influencing their elections, and each of us has the right to know that the foundation of our democracy is protected against foreign interference. But while the media has spent considerable time focusing on threats abroad from Russia and China, comparatively little attention has been paid to the torrent of foreign money flowing into American politics from foreign nationals like billionaire activist Hansjorg Wyss.

Mr. Wyss is one of the largest political donors in the United States, but he is not an American citizen. Last week, Politico reported that “Wyss doled out more than \$63 million in grants to left-leaning groups in fiscal 2022.”¹ As you will soon hear in greater detail from Caitlin Sutherland of Americans for Public Trust, Wyss has pumped nearly half a billion dollars of foreign funding into political causes throughout the US. \$243 million of that sum have landed in the coffers of a left-wing political spending powerhouse, the Sixteen Thirty Fund.²

Ohioans are acutely aware of Sixteen Thirty Fund’s impact, even if they do not know it. Last year alone, Sixteen Thirty spent more than \$14 million on ballot measure campaigns in this state. Sixteen Thirty is already one of the largest donors to a forthcoming ballot measure to fundamentally change the redistricting process. And Mr. Wyss’s personal attorney, Marc Elias, is currently suing in the Ohio Supreme Court to advance a second ballot measure intended to rewrite this state’s election laws and even to reopen the door to non-citizen voting.

These proposed ballot measures aim to affect the makeup of elected legislatures and rewrite the rules that govern elections. These are foundational issues to the democratic process, yet there is no law in place to ensure that foreign nationals are not influencing these highly consequential campaigns. So long as that is true, Ohioans can expect foreign funding to continue influencing elections in this state. Indeed, Sixteen Thirty has an established history of spending massive

¹ “Wyss’ nonprofit showered liberal groups with more than \$63M,” February 16, 2024.

<https://www.politico.com/newsletters/politico-influence/2024/02/16/wyss-dark-money-group-showered-liberal-groups-with-more-than-63m-00142025>.

² Prior to the most recent disclosures, it was known that Wyss provided \$208 million to Sixteen Thirty. The most recent disclosures add \$35 million to this total. Americans for Public Trust,

<https://americansforpublictrust.org/news/report-left-wing-swiss-billionaire-exploiting-the-foreign-influence-loophole/>.



sums to advance measures like those facing Ohio this year. In 2022, Sixteen Thirty spent over \$10 million to advance Michigan Proposal 2, a measure strikingly similar to the so-called “Ohio Voters Bill of Rights,” and \$6 million on a 2018 Michigan measure to reshape the redistricting process.³ And that is just one state.

Federal and state laws have prohibited foreign nationals from donating to candidate races for federal, state and local office for decades. It is long past time to bring similar safeguards against foreign influence to ballot measure contests.

Numerous other states have taken similar steps, including Colorado, Maryland, Nevada, Washington, and more.⁴ Last year, more than 86% of voters in Maine adopted an initiative to prohibit foreign spending on ballot measures.

Here in Ohio, a poll conducted by our sister organization, HEP Action, found that 85% of registered voters think foreign nationals should not be allowed to influence elections. 68% would back a law to block indirect influence of elections. And let us not forget that in 2022, some 77% of Ohioans voted to ban non-citizen voting in this state. Clearly there is broad public consensus that non-citizens should not be influencing elections in this state.

SB 215 would make great strides towards safeguarding the integrity of Ohio’s elections against foreign influence without in any way inhibiting the ability of American citizens to donate to the candidates and causes they support. Nor does the bill infringe on important protections for the privacy of American donors who choose to contribute to political causes in this state. Drawing this distinction between citizens and non-citizens is eminently reasonable. After all, we do not allow non-citizens to vote and we have long banned non-citizens from donating to political candidates.

The ballot measure process deserves these same protections. This should not be a partisan issue. Every Ohio voter should know that every election in this state is free of foreign interference. I applaud the members of the Ohio Senate for leading the way on this important issue and am happy to take any questions you may have.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

³ Michigan Proposal 2 (2018), [https://ballotpedia.org/Michigan_Proposal_2,_Independent_Redistricting_Commission_Initiative_\(2018\)#Campaign_finance](https://ballotpedia.org/Michigan_Proposal_2,_Independent_Redistricting_Commission_Initiative_(2018)#Campaign_finance). Michigan Proposal 2 (2022), [https://ballotpedia.org/Michigan_Proposal_2,_Voting_Policies_in_Constitution_Amendment_\(2022\)#Campaign_finance](https://ballotpedia.org/Michigan_Proposal_2,_Voting_Policies_in_Constitution_Amendment_(2022)#Campaign_finance).

⁴ [https://ballotpedia.org/Maine_Question_2,_Prohibit_Foreign_Spending_in_Elections_Initiative_\(2023\)](https://ballotpedia.org/Maine_Question_2,_Prohibit_Foreign_Spending_in_Elections_Initiative_(2023)).